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KNIGHTS VALLEY

Jackson winery approved

Supervisors OK proposal in straw vote; tasting facility would be first for area

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Billionaire vintner Jess Jackson will get to add another winery to his stable, this one in Knights Valley, where many residents of the bucolic northeastern agricultural community oppose his plans for a tasting room.

After a four-hour public hearing on the proposal by Jackson Family Wines to establish a boutique winery on the slopes of Mount St. Helena, Sonoma County supervisors approved the Pelton House project on a straw vote of 4-1.

Opponents focused most of their complaints on the seven-day-a-week tasting room, which would be the first one in Knights Valley open to the public without appointment.

Shirlee Zane, newly elected supervisor who represents central Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park, cast the only no vote.

"Jackson Enterprises does own several other tasting rooms and they can market (their wines) at other places," Zane said.

However, Supervisor Paul Kelley, board chairman whose north county district includes most of Knights Valley and Franz Valley, defended Jackson's project. He said the proposal was allowed under general plan provisions and the tasting room was essential for the company to promote its new 5,000-case brand.

Kelley lauded Jackson's plans to restore a 150-year-old stone winery building, and he credited the project with growing grapes on 35 acres at the site that will be used in production of the Pelton House brand.

Kelley said the historic nature of the restoration project and the combination of vineyards at the tasting room "creates an opportunity to move forward on this project without setting precedent."

Zane disagreed, saying "while it is permissible, I remain unconvinced that it is prudent."



MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat
Bill Kortum of Petaluma, urges the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors to keep the integrity of Knights Valley when considering Kendall Jackson's proposed winery on Highway 128, Tuesday January 27, 2009.

Development issues raised during the Pelton House winery debate are likely to emerge again as supervisors grapple with implementation of the 2020 General Plan, approved last fall by the previous board. Zane is new to the panel, as is 5th District Supervisor Efren Carrillo, whose proposals for a "middle ground" solution that would limit tasting room hours and reduce the number of special events didn't find any takers on the board.

The Pelton House Winery project will return to supervisors for a final vote on March 24.

Under terms being drafted by county planners, a new wine production facility will be located uphill away from Highway 128. The tasting room will be open from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily, and the renovated stone building could host four events annually, with a 200-person limit. Under the use permit, weddings and concerts would be prohibited at the winery.

Since the winery was first proposed four years ago, the project has split residents active in the Knights Valley and Franz Valley neighborhood association, which has about 220 members. Activists on both sides have battled in the association's board elections and they were prominent in the 2006 supervisorial campaign, where Windsor councilwoman Debora Fudge narrowly missed unseating Kelley.

"From the beginning, we said a winery for making wine is appropriate, but in Knights Valley public tasting and public events was not appropriate," Craig Enyart, Knights Valley activist and a leader in the Maacama Watershed Alliance, told supervisors.

Former south county Supervisor Bill Kortum called on the board to avoid sullyng entrances to the county with development projects. He compared the Jackson winery project, on Napa County's border, to a Dutra Asphalt Co. project at Petaluma's south end, which supervisors will face next Tuesday.

"In Knights Valley, once you establish a tasting room, it will be real difficult turning down others," Kortum said. "You guys are lucky you have a community that values protection of the entries to Sonoma County."

Many residents who testified at the hearing said the winery would ruin the rural nature of their valley by bringing traffic, wine tasters and tourists to one of the most obscure sections of Sonoma County. The Knights and Franz valleys sprawl below Mount St. Helena, encompassing large ranches where livestock graze and vineyards dot rolling hillsides.

In 1996, Jackson, one of the country's richest men, bought 656 acres near the intersection of Highway 128 and Ida Clayton Road, which winds down from the mountain.

Jackson and his wife, attorney Barbara Banke, own Jackson Family Wines, which produces three dozen brands, including Sonoma County vintages such as Matanzas Creek, Murphy-Goode, La Crema, Arrowood and Stonestreet. Annual production from all of the wineries totals about 6 million cases.

The only winery now in Knights Valley is owned by Peter Michael, a wealthy British businessman who produces 30,000 cases of high-end wine. His winery is open for tasting by appointment only. When it was established in the late 1980s, it was turned down for a public tasting room.

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